Tennessee Williams is an American playwright famous for three big plays: *Glass Menagerie* in 1944, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. If *The Glass Menagerie* propelled Williams to fame, *Streetcar* ensured that his name would never leave the ranks of the playwright elite. The play, which tells the story of an aging Southern belle’s difficult relationship with her aggressive brother-in-law, was successful both commercially and critically. It opened in December of 1947 on Broadway and ran for over two full years, earning two Tony awards for the stage production and the 1948 Pulitzer Prize.

The initial Broadway cast is almost as famous as the play for one big reason: Marlon Brando. (Whom you know as the Godfather, but who was the Brad Pitt of his day when he was younger.) Virtually an unknown at the time of the play’s casting, *Streetcar* propelled this young star to big-time fame after the Broadway production (and cast) was converted to a blockbuster movie in 1951. The only change from the Broadway cast was the role of protagonist Blanche DuBois, given in the film to then-famous Vivian Leigh (Scarlett from *Gone with the Wind*), so the movie would have some star-power.

*Streetcar* really pushed the envelope of what was acceptable sexually in the 1940s, and Brando took the role of aggressive, macho Stanley Kowalski to the very edge (critic Arthur Miller aptly called him “a sexual terrorist, a tiger on the loose”). His performance was so memorable that many theaters to this day refuse to produce the play on the grounds that any actor trying to portray Stanley Kowalski would inevitably be written off as a lesser version of Brando.

Speaking of sexuality, *Streetcar* was censored when it was converted to film, like another Williams play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Both plays include a gay man who, restricted by social boundaries in the 1940s and 50s, marries a woman. While this is a central part of *Cat*, it is a minor part of *Streetcar*. *Streetcar*...
also shares similarities with Williams’s first big play, Glass Menagerie. Streetcar’s Blanche Dubois resembles Amanda Wingfield in Glass Menagerie; both are Southern belles who have difficulty moving past their outdated social ideals.

These common themes appear to be autobiographical for Williams, who was raised in Tennessee (hence the nickname) and grew up gay in a homophobic society. In fact, some believe that Williams based the character of Stanley Kowalski on a man named Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez whom he was dating at the time.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Men and Masculinity**

The sheer animal force of antagonist Stanley Kowalski is partly responsible for the fame of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In this play, masculinity means aggression, control, physical dominance, and even violence. Accompanying these traits are a general lack of refinement, manners, and sensitivity. One point of view expressed in the play is that this sort of brute masculinity is primitive and sub-human; another is that it is attractive and sexually appealing.

**Questions About Men and Masculinity**

1. Stella thinks that Stanley’s aggression is attractive and exciting, while Blanche is terrified by it. What explains their different reactions?
2. Does the play condemn or condone Stanley’s type of masculinity? What or whom does Streetcar hold up as an ideal form of masculinity?
3. Why does Mitch hit Stanley at the end of the play?

Possible Thesis Statement:

The conflict between Blanche and Stanley boils down to different ideals of masculinity.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Marriage**

The central marriage in *A Streetcar Named Desire* operates on a tumultuous combination of hero-worship, aggression, sexual attraction, and a difficult class difference between husband and wife. Despite the challenges, we never doubt for a moment the intensity of love these two feel for each other. There’s something primitive or almost animal in the ferocity of their interactions – both fighting and love-making – that makes their relationship difficult for some other characters to understand. In this marriage, we definitely see traditional gender roles of a dominant husband who brings home the money and pays the bills; and the doting housewife who is responsible for making dinner, cleaning up, and raising a child.
Questions About Marriage

1. How does Blanche’s presence change the dynamic between Stella and Stanley?
2. Is the Kowalski marriage a healthy one?
3. Does it seem like Blanche and Mitch’s potential marriage would be healthy?
4. What’s the difference between Steve and Eunice’s marriage and Stella and Stanley’s? What does the upstairs couple tell us about the downstairs couple?

Possible Thesis Statement:

There are no positive relationships between men and women in A Streetcar Named Desire.

A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Society and Class

A Streetcar Named Desire deals with class differences in New Orleans during the 1940s. One point of view is that of a fading Southern belle, with outdated ideals about the socially elite and those she considers "beneath" her social rank – like second or third-generation immigrants. Contrast this with the opposing, more modern (at the time) point of view that Americans are Americans, and that immigrants are the foundation of the U.S.

Questions About Society and Class

1. What is it about marrying a man of a different social rank that appeals so to Stella?
2. What is Streetcar’s view of the old South and its ideals – as something romantic to be admired, or as something archaic and no longer applicable?
3. What does Blanche find so appealing about Mitch? Does it have anything to do with social class?
4. Where does Mitch fit socially – as someone in Blanche’s class, or someone in Stanley’s? What determines that, anyway?

Possible Thesis Statements:

Neither Stella nor Stanley takes class into consideration when regarding their relationship. They exist outside class boundaries all together.

Stella and Stanley’s attraction for each other is based solely on their class differences.

Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Sex

Sex is essentially a destructive force in A Streetcar Named Desire, though this destruction takes a variety of forms, including literal death, physical violence, mental degradation, the sullying of a good reputation, and even financial ruin. It’s very much tied to physical aggression, both in the sexual relations between husband and wife, but also in the play’s rape scene.
Questions About Sex

1. Is Blanche attracted to Stanley? How do you know one way or the other?
2. Blanche says the only way to deal with a man like Stanley is to sleep with him. What does that mean? Why would sex be a way to handle aggression?
3. Is sex a means or an end for Blanche? For Stanley?

Possible Thesis Statements:

Blanche tries to use sex to recapture her youth.

Lust is the only unifying force between Stanley and Stella.

A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol is used as a means of escape in A Streetcar Named Desire. Main character Blanche DuBois uses booze to distract herself from reality and to retreat further into a world of fantasy and cleverly contrived artifice. Habitual drinking isn’t ideal for a woman’s reputation in the 1940s, so the habit is often hidden or disguised. For the male gender, alcohol is very much tied to physical aggression and plays a part in the play’s worst violence.

Questions About Drugs and Alcohol

1. How is Blanche’s drinking different from Stanley’s drinking?
2. When, specifically, do we see Blanche drinking? What type of provocation seems to be driving her to the bottle?
3. The stage directions tell us that Blanche is drinking to escape. Which poses a bigger threat to her: the memory of her past, or the reality of her present debacle? Which is she most trying to escape?

Possible Thesis Statements:

Drinking is a masculine habit in A Streetcar Named Desire.
Blanche’s increased drinking marks her descent into madness in A Streetcar Named Desire.

A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Appearances

For main character and fading Southern belle Blanche DuBois, appearances are important. They’re also generally fake. Consumed with the need to appear younger and more innocent than she actually is, every personal interaction is a series of machinations and contrivances designed to reveal the truth, regarding both looks and reputation.
Questions About Appearances

1. We get a lot of description of Blanche’s looks, but not so much of Stella’s. What DO we know about Stella’s appearance? Does it matter to the play?

2. Marlon Brando’s role in Streetcar has gone down in history as the most famous Stanley Kowalski ever. Should Stanley be played by an attractive guy like Brando? Is he supposed to be good-looking? Why or why not?

3. If reputation is so important to Blanche, why did she behave the way she did back in Laurel?

Possible Thesis Statements:

- Blanche obsesses over her aging appearance because she can’t stand to look at her inner character.

- Physical appearance is the most important tool of characterization used in A Streetcar Named Desire.

A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Madness

A Streetcar Named Desire features a gradual descent into madness, brought about by loss, depression, financial ruin, and the cruelty of others. At first, this so-called "madness" is just an attempted escape from reality – an altered self-image and a polished persona that doesn't accurately reflect the character below. As the play progresses, however, this self-deception intensifies and deviates further and further from reality. By the play’s conclusion, the main character can no longer distinguish between her fantasies and the world around her.

Questions About Madness

1. Does fantasy help Blanche deal with the world, or is it more destructive than beneficial?

2. If Stanley hadn’t raped Blanche, what would have happened to her? Would her mental health continue to decline?

3. When does Blanche most intensely indulge in fantasy? What brings about these retreats from reality?

4. At the end of the play, has Blanche really lost touch with reality? Does she belong at a mental institution?

Possible Thesis Statement:

A Streetcar Named Desire argues that self-delusion is necessary, and fantasy is superior to reality.

A Streetcar Named Desire Theme of Mortality

Death features prominently in A Streetcar Named Desire, and is very much connected to lust. Sex seems to be responsible for much of the death – literal and figurative – that we see in the play. Oddly enough, characters also turn to sex to comfort themselves in times of loss, which only leads to...more destruction. Death comes in all varieties in this play: the loss of reputation, sanity, physical well-being, relationships, and youth.
Questions About Mortality

1. By the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, what has died – both literally and figuratively?
2. What is the most destructive force in this play?
3. Did you notice that Stella gives birth at the same time that Stanley is raping Blanche? What’s going on there?
4. What do you make of the final scene, where Stella sits with her baby (new life, right?) while Blanche is carted away?

Possible Thesis Statement:

Death is a unifying force in *Streetcar*; shared pain allows the characters to bond with one another.

* A Streetcar Named Desire Symbolism, Imagery & Allegory

Sometimes, there’s more to Lit than meets the eye.

Lights and the Paper Lantern

Blanche makes a big deal out of never being seen in direct light. She uses a paper lantern like a shield to block out the strong light of the naked bulb in the Kowalski apartment. The obvious conclusion is that she’s getting older and doesn’t want anyone – particularly Mitch – to see that she’s no longer a girl of sixteen. Actually, Mitch says it best: "I don’t think I ever seen you in the light. That’s a fact! […] You never want to go out till after six and then it’s always some place that’s not lighted much. […] What it means is I’ve never had a real good look at you" (9.28-36).

Of course, if you want to get fancy, you might argue that Blanche is hiding more than just the fine lines around her mouth. We know that she’s ashamed of her behavior in Laurel and desperate to hide her past from Mitch. Is it possible that she’s manifesting this desire to hide in a physical way? Probably.

We get another layer of meaning to this lights business when Blanche discusses her former husband, Allan. She describes falling in love as though "you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that’s how it struck the world for me" (6.120). When she caught him with another man, later confronted him, and discovered his suicide, she claims that "the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this — kitchen — candle…" (6.120).

In short, what she’s saying is that being in love illuminated the world for her. When her husband died, the world was in darkness again. What does this have to do with the paper lantern? Plenty. What we see now is that shielding the harsh light isn’t just about blocking Blanche from the plain view of the world – it’s also about blocking the world from Blanche’s eyes. She doesn’t want to see it. She doesn’t want to deal with reality. Does that sound like a Major Point in Blanche’s character? Good, because it is. (Read her "Character Analysis" for more.)

Blanche also uses light imagery to describe the benefits of poetry, music, and art – in contrast to what
she considers to be Stanley's primitive nature. She tells Stella, "There has been some progress since then! Such things as art—as poetry and music—such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! [...] In this dark march [...] don't — don't hang back with the brutes!" (4.118). It's fitting that things like art and poetry are described the same way as love for Blanche—as forms of light penetrating the darkness of the world. Remember, she's an English teacher, and her idea of love is an incredibly romanticized, poetic, artful one.

The last prong of this light imagery has to do with Stanley. We couldn't help but notice that he describes the sex with his wife as "having them colored lights going" (8.55). He uses this phrasing twice, actually, which should draw your attention. It's important that while light was a form of love for Blanche, it's innuendo for sex for Stanley. It's also important that the lights are colored, which is in contrast to Blanche (whose name means "white"). See "Tools of Characterization" for more discussion of this color business.

**Flowers**

Remember in "What's Up With The Title?" when we talk all about the connection between desire and death in *A Streetcar Named Desire*? If not, you should check it out. Flowers are the perfect symbol of this odd pairing of lust and destruction. To start, take a look at the end of Scene Five, when Mitch brings Blanche roses. He's using flowers to court Blanche—desire, right? Now look at Scene Nine, when the Mexican Woman comes around selling *flores para los muertos*, or "flowers for the dead." We just went from desire to death in three scenes using one symbol. As if that weren't enough, we have this lovely exchange right here:

**STELLA**
You are as fresh as a daisy.

**BLANCHE**
One that's been picked a few days. (3.33-4)

Stella means to suggest that Blanche is attractive (desire), but Blanche feels as though she's past her prime (death).

**Music**

First of all, if you read your stage directions carefully you'll notice that Williams uses music to establish the mood of many different scenes in *Streetcar*. It's basically like watching a movie, where the music is fast-paced during a chase scene, tender in a love scene, etc. But we're interested more in the specific songs that are used repeatedly as symbols in the play—starting with the "Varsouviana." Williams mentions the name of this polka in his stage directions, but Blanche, too, gives its name in Scene Nine. This is important, since those watching the play instead of reading it don't have the benefit of Williams's commentary. If he wanted the audience to know the tune, he had to place it in the dialogue of one of his characters.

Now what is this Varsouviana? Why haven't we heard of it? Well, it's a polka tune, so unless you're into that you likely wouldn't have encountered this song before. It sounds a bit like merry-go-round music,
which you can imagine is eerie to hear in a Gothic-type drama on the stage. Or, if you don't feel like imagining, watch this a man play it on the accordion on YouTube. Or listen to a 30-second clip on iTunes; there are a few.

Anyway you get the point. It sets the mood of Blanche being unstable and imagining creepy music that no one else can hear. It also helps when she explains that her husband killed himself while the Varsouviana Polka was playing. She can't escape the guilt of feeling like she caused his suicide. She can't escape her husband’s death, so she can't escape the music, either.

What else have we got for music? How about the song "Paper Moon" that Blanche sings while she's in the bathtub in Scene Seven? Just a random ditty? Take a look at the lyrics before you write it off. These lines – all sung by Blanche – are interwoven with Stanley and Stella’s argument:

**BLANCHE**
(singing) "Say, it's only a paper moon, Sailing over a cardboard sea—But it wouldn’t be make-believe If you believed in me!

[...]
It's a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be— But it wouldn’t be make-believe If you believed in me!

[...]
Without your love,
It's a honky-tonk parade!
Without your love,
It’s a melody played in a Penny arcade...

[...]
It’s only a paper moon, Just as phony as it can be— But it wouldn’t be make-believe If you believed in me!

[...]
It's a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be." (9.30-45)

We-llll, what do we have here? A world filled with fantasy? Check. Blanche’s complete dependence on the love of other people? Check. The need for others to join her in self-delusion and artifice? Check, check, check.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Setting**

**The Kowalski apartment and the surrounding neighborhood in 1940s New Orleans**

What we know about the atmosphere of setting in *Streetcar* comes from Williams’s stage directions. He tells us that us that the area is "poor" but "has a raffish charm." He says the sky is "a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. [...] In this part of New Orleans, you are practically always just around the corner [...] from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. [...] New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (Stage Directions, Scene One). Here’s a great image of this mood-setting coloring, by the way.
This introduction – and particularly its attention to social context – is important for the way we read *Streetcar*. Race relations weren't "easy" everywhere in the 1940s, but it's important to establish the atmosphere in this particular setting, especially since Blanche brings to the Kowalski apartment her prejudices, which prove to be out of time and place. Class distinctions don't matter here, which is why Stella and Stanley seem to make a fine match despite their backgrounds.

As far as the actual physical set-up on the stage, it’s important that we can see the upstairs, the downstairs, the interior, and the exterior. The play’s action takes spectacular advantage of the flexibility this offers, whether it be Stanley listening in on his wife and her sister, Stella walking down the stairs to the waiting arms of her husband, or the way we get to watch two scenes at once – Blanche flirting with Mitch in the back-room while the men play poker in the front.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Narrator:**

Who is the narrator, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Though all works of literature present the author’s point of view, they don’t all have a narrator or a narrative voice that ties together and presents the story. This particular piece of literature does not have a narrator through whose eyes or voice we learn the story.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Tone**


**Sympathetic**

What we’re getting at here in our discussion of "Tone" is Williams's attitude toward his protagonist, Blanche DuBois. We admit that Blanche comes off as quite silly for a good chunk of the text (spraying Stanley with her perfume, flirting with the men at the poker table), but it's actually more tear-jerking than laughable. We feel bad for her – and probably embarrassed on her behalf. The rape in Scene Ten and the broken-down Blanche in Scene Eleven is what really drives the point home, and what convinces us that the play takes a sympathetic approach – not a ridiculing one – to this fading Southern belle.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Writing Style**

**Lyrical, Potent**

Williams’s style comes across best in his stage directions, with lines like this one: "You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee." He doesn't hold back. He also brilliantly strikes at the heart of his characters with such potent descriptions as this one of Stanley: "The gaudy seed-bearer, […] he sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he looks at them."
Single lines carry enormous weight in helping us understand the characters we see on the stage. In other words, this prose packs a punch.

**What’s Up With the Title?**

Let’s start with the literal meaning of the title. There is an actual streetcar named “Desire” that Blanche takes on her way to the Kowalskis’. She mentions it twice. First, in Scene One, she tells Eunice that “they told [her] to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!” (1.16). Later, she berates Stella for her obsession with Stanley and mentions the streetcar again. Take a look:

**BLANCHE**

*What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire! The name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...*

**STELLA**

*Haven’t you ever ridden on that street-car?*

**BLANCHE**

*It brought me here.*

(4.104-106)

Which brings us nicely into our discussion of the metaphorical meaning of the title. Blanche is literally brought to the Kowalski place by “Desire,” but she is also brought there by desire; her sexual escapades in Laurel ruined her reputation and drove her out of town. Now, this isn’t the first time we’ve seen sex do destructive things in Williams’s play. In fact, go back to Blanche’s first reference to the streetcar that we opened this discussion with. Desire, then Cemeteries, then Elysian Fields. Sex, death, the afterlife. It’s like a linear progression. Sex leads to death, or at least some heavy-duty wreckage. Don’t believe us? Here are a few examples:

1. Blanche claims that her ancestors’ “epic fornications” led to the squandering of the family fortune and the eventual loss of Belle Reve.
2. Blanche’s own good reputation meets its end at the hand of her epic fornications in the Flamingo Hotel.
3. After Blanche had an affair with a high school student of hers, her boss, a Mr. GRAVES, fired her.
4. When Blanche’s former husband was found having sex with another man, he killed himself out of shame.
5. And The Big One: Stanley’s rape of Blanche (a sexual act) kills what’s left of her sanity.

Blanche herself seems to recognize some sort of connection here with this line, one that is key to understanding the role that desire plays in *Streetcar*: “Death [...], death was as close as you are. [...] The opposite is desire” (9.69-71). Blanche is somehow under the impression that sex is her escape from death. She turned to sex to comfort herself after her husband died, and after her relatives passed away one by one. Unfortunately, as we already know, Desire leads to Cemeteries leads to the Elysian Fields.
Blanche has actually gotten herself into a vicious cycle. Something dies, so she turns to sex, which causes something else to die, which makes her turn to sex, and on and on...

**What’s Up With the Epigraph?**

Epigraphs are like little appetizers to the great entrée of a story. They illuminate important aspects of the story, and they get us headed in the right direction.

And so it was I entered the broken world  
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice  
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)  
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.  
– “The Broken Tower” by Hart Crane

Williams was a great admirer of the poet Hart Crane, and one thing both writers had in common was their love of metaphor. Perhaps “The Broken Tower” acts as a sort of metaphor for the poetic mood and themes of love and loss that Williams wanted to bring out in *Streetcar*. The start of the epigraph brings to mind Blanche’s journey into New Orleans, to her a “broken world.” It also captures the fleeting nature of love, which for Blanche was only “an instant in the wind” (remember the boy that died?). As for the epigraph’s ending, it’s cryptic, but it certainly seems that desperate choices are made throughout *Streetcar*, right? So why not lead in with a note of desperation? It’s certainly dramatic

**What’s Up With the Ending?**

The ending to *A Streetcar Named Desire* is all about cruel and tragic irony. Blanche is shipped off to a mental institution because she can’t deal with reality and retreats into illusion – yet Stella is doing the very same thing by ignoring her sister’s story about Stanley. (See Stella’s “Character Analysis” for lots more.) Blanche, who always insisted that she “[doesn’t] tell the truth, [but rather] what ought to be truth,” has actually come clean about reality for the first time (by revealing that Stanley raped her). But no one believes her.

Blanche’s final and very famous line, “I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers,” is yet another example of tragic irony; what she considers “kindness” is only desire – the attention she gets from “strangers” is generally sexual in nature. (Again, lots more to say on this in her “Character Analysis.”) It’s a fitting ending for a work that explores cruelty and tragedy to such a gut-wrenching degree.

**A Streetcar Named Desire Questions**

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. *Streetcar* is divided into eleven scenes rather than the traditional act and scene divisions. What is the effect of this structure?
2. How does Williams tend to end scenes? On a consistently dramatic note? A tragic one? With suspense?
3. Are there any moral or ethical lessons to be found in *A Streetcar Named Desire*?
4. We’ve spent a lot of time contrasting Blanche and Stanley as opposite characters and symbols of conflicting ideals. But in what ways are these two similar? And how do these commonalities complicate the interpretation of the play?
5. What sort of acting choices do you see the characters having to play, particularly Blanche, Stanley, and Stella? Are the characters pretty clearly mapped out in the script, or is there much room for interpretation?
6. How important is the final scene (Eleven) of *Streetcar*? What does it add to the play? Why not just end with the rape in Scene Ten?